Tribal Dynamics and the Iraq Surge

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In his 2007 State of the Union address, President Bush unveiled a new strategy for the war in Iraq that involved an influx of 30,000 additional combat forces. The initial tactical objective of "the surge" was to reduce the violence by restoring order to Baghdad. Its stated strategic objective and purpose was to give the al-Maliki government the space and time needed to progress in other areas, specifically political reconciliation. The first contingent of troops deployed to the Iraqi capital in early 2007, with the last units arriving by the end of June. The operation ended in mid 2008, when the last of the surge-related combat units headed home. In 2009, the United States began a systematic reduction of its forces from the urban outposts it had manned as part of the operation. By the end of June 2009, a total withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraqi cities and urban population centers was complete. Given the recent repositioning of American forces in Iraq and the Obama administration's stated intent to refocus US efforts on the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, a critical analysis of the Iraq surge is vital to achieving strategic success, not only in the Middle East and Central Asia, but in other regions of the world as well.

No one has argued that the influx of additional combat forces was the sole factor responsible for the reduction in violence in Iraq. The conventional wisdom is that the surge, working in combination with other causal factors, resulted in an improved situation.[1] Some, however, question what the surge has actually accomplished, arguing that while it worked tactically from a military perspective, it failed strategically from a political perspective.[2] The objective of this research is to gain an understanding of why that is the case by addressing three key questions. First, since scholars and subject matter experts have identified other causal

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factors besides the surge, could there be another? Second, is it possible that this "dynamic" factor, acting as a top-level governing element, directly affected the behavior of the others? Third, could this top-level "dynamic" factor be the primary reason the surge succeeded tactically but failed politically and strategically? Preliminary analysis suggests this could be the case. After a more in-depth evaluation, one factor did emerge that fit the category of a "top-level governing element," that being *the principle of Iraqi tribal dynamics* (ITD).

The first section of this article focuses on analyzing the existing evidence and data. The goal is twofold: to examine all factors that coalesced to produce what appears to be an improved security situation and to advance the principle of ITD. Next it addresses the nature and characteristics of ITD and its cultural features. Then the article analyzes the relationship between the principle of ITD and the surge. The fourth section is composed of three parts which (1) examine the evidence used to support the contention that the surge did work militarily, (2) analyze reporting to gauge what current trends in violence may indicate, and (3) address the fact that the United States is facing a number of foreign-policy challenges across the globe. The latter demonstrates that a cultural-centric analytical approach will be instrumental in formulating well-developed courses of action that could help produce a positive outcome. Because Iraqi society is composed of more than 80 different tribes, the study employed a macro-level analytical approach instead of a more detailed micro-level examination and analysis of individual tribes. Therefore, the critical analysis centers on three large, macro-level tribal groups—Iraqi Sunnis, Iraqi Shia, and Iraqi Kurds—each composed of a number of individual tribal-based entities.

The Suggestion of Other Possible Causes

In 2007, Dr. Marc Lynch, an associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, organized an online symposium on Iraq. The impetus for the event stemmed from all the political bickering over "the surge" that, according to Lynch, had caused the public discourse to degenerate into partisan arguments focused on casualty figures and body counts. He was concerned that a willingness to engage in a more fundamental debate that addressed important core geopolitical and strategic questions was being lost due to the elevated levels of political fervor and rhetoric.[3] To assist in this endeavor, Lynch solicited

the support of two colleagues: Dr. Colin H. Kahl, assistant professor, Security Services Program, Georgetown University, and Dr. Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.

Based on the number of important contributions that emerged from the symposium, the final report deemed the event a success. An essay from Dr. Kahl critically examined the prospects for stability and political accommodation in Iraq. His analysis demonstrated that the surge was one of four interrelated factors that eventually merged to help improve the security situation. The other three are:

- the Sunni "awakening"—the initiative to recruit Sunni tribes and former militants who had begun turning against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to join in a partnership with the US military,

- the Sadr "freeze"—Muqtada al-Sadr's decision not to challenge the Baghdad security plan and to stand down his militia, and

- sectarian cleansing—the prior sectarian cleansing activity, which had actually run its course by the time the surge was in full swing, resulted in defensible enclaves within the capital segmented along sectarian lines.[4]

Kahl's thesis is thought provoking, but did other researchers and scholars arrive at the same or similar conclusions? A review of the literature showed that was the case. Steven Simon, senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, also argued that the influx of troops was not the sole change agent responsible for the reduced levels of violence.[5] Instead, it was the result of the surge working in combination with three other important developments: "the grim success of ethnic cleansing, the [perceived] tactical quiescence [and acquiescence] of the Shiite militias, and a series of deals between US forces and Sunni tribes that constituted a new bottom-up approach to pacifying Iraq."[6]

The next step in the analysis involved cross-correlating Kahl's and Simon's work. This proved an invaluable activity because it helped validate the notion that the surge, in conjunction with other factors, caused a reduction in violence, and it forced to the surface two other important analytical questions. The first concerned whether this other factor was actually a top-level governing element, and if so, the second question examined whether it had a direct effect on the behavior of the other four. To determine the validity of these two questions, more in-depth analysis was required to examine each of the four causal factors in relation to the others. Initially, the results seemed

promising. As the analysis proceeded, a fifth factor eventually emerged, and the data seemed to suggest that this factor was also acting as a top-level element. The end result was the verification of a fifth factor, defined and characterized as the governing principle of Iraqi tribal dynamics.

Investigating ITD—Its Nature and Characteristics

The process of analyzing the connection between ITD and the surge requires an examination of the key elements that define its nature and characteristics. Understandably, tribal dynamics are predicated on a host of cultural features, such as religion, kinship, business (both legal and illicit), history, politics, interpersonal relationships, and customs. While addressing each in detail would have enhanced the quality and strength of this study, doing so was beyond the scope. Therefore, only a few key features, such as history, politics, loyalty, and customs (specifically "blood feud/vengeance"), were examined, with the intent of linking them to the thesis being offered.

Some General Aspects of Middle East Tribal Dynamics

To this day, the Arab Bedouin tribal community is an integral part of modern Iraqi society and culture. Both can trace their roots to biblical times and the harsh environmental realities of the desert. Over time, the prime orientation of this tribal-based culture evolved to embrace more of a communitarian viewpoint with common goals and objectives and less of an individualistic one. Based on these historical antecedents, the group—not the individual—became the sociological lynchpin for the pre-Islamic Bedouin tribal community.[7] Members of the tribe do have rights and duties, but only as they pertain to the welfare of the group. In terms of tribal cohesion, a number of external and internal forces help to cement this community together as a unit. The external is the need for self-defense against a multitude of harsh environmental elements. The internal is the basic social bond that encompasses the blood tie of descent through the male line of a tribal family unit.

Another feature that further defines and characterizes the Bedouin culture, along with regulating its behavior, is tribal customs. The driving force behind these social norms centers on the veneration of ancestors and associated precedents, sanctioned only by tribal public opinion. One in particular is the social-limiting custom of blood vengeance that imposes

"on the kin of a murdered man the duty [and social responsibility] of exacting vengeance from the murderer or one of his fellow tribesmen."[8] If the perpetrator is from another tribe, it is possible that a blood feud could erupt between the two tribal groups. If the tribe seeking vengeance is weaker, it can attempt to seek an alliance with another tribe, thus adhering to the tribal dynamic principle that the enemy of my enemy is now my friend, even if this means forging a relationship with a former enemy or rival tribal group. An important aspect of this type of group behavior is that these alliances are most often temporary in nature, falling more into the realm of "marriages of convenience," and causing loyalties to shift like the shifting sand, depending on which way the tribal political wind is blowing. Likewise, Arab tribal groups will apply this same approach, only in a much broader context, when confronted with an external foreign invader or occupier. From an organizational behavior perspective, this is a key axiom, because such insights help bring us closer to understanding how and why the surge succeeded in one sense but failed in another.

As previously mentioned, there is also a political dimension to tribal dynamics, which is rudimentary and grounded in customs. The head of a tribal-based community is the sayyid, or sheik. This person is normally selected by a group of tribal elders and, once chosen, is viewed by the group as a first among equals. The sheik is not a central authority with coercive powers and neither inflicts penalties nor imposes duties on individual members of the group. Based on these societal norms, the sheik will therefore follow the principle of arbitration rather than dictatorial command, going with tribal opinion rather than trying to impose his will upon the group. In fact, to this nomadic society and culture, exercising subservience to a central authority has always been somewhat of an abhorrent and foreign concept.[9]

Socio-Historical Features

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, there has been an ongoing discussion amongst scholars on whether Iraqi society can ever truly embrace the principles of democracy or at least the basic tenets of a representative form of governance.[10] According to Hussein Sirriyeh, this debate has resulted in the emergence of two schools of thought.[11] One argues that democracy is attainable in Iraq; the other contends that democracy in Iraq is unfeasible in view of the ongoing violence between Shia and Sunnis fueled by long-

standing sectarian tension between those religious and culturally diverse sociopolitical groups.[12]

While important from a tribal dynamics perspective, the question of whether democracy is attainable in Iraq is not a new one and has been addressed before by Iraqi historical sociologist Ali al-Wardi. Through some seminal work, al-Wardi has come closer than most in defining and characterizing the nature of the ITD phenomenon. His in-depth observation and analysis highlighted the conflict-strewn nature of Iraqi society—a condition that pits tribe against tribe, neighborhood against neighborhood, tribe against the government, Shia against Sunni, and everyone together against an outsider—all of which is being "held together by the geographic imperatives of coexistence in the same space rather than a common sense of shared history or purpose."[13]

The methodology used by al-Wardi was simple and straightforward. It consisted of careful and meticulous observation of events and conditions. He rejected the statistically based approach of modern, mainly Anglo-American, social science because he found it inappropriate for analyzing Iraq's culture and sociological conditions.[14] Al-Wardi acknowledged two important facts concerning his research: first, that he followed the methodological traditions of Max Weber and second, that he was influenced by the work of Ibn Khaldun, one of the Islamic community's greatest historical philosophers. All told, it was "probably from Ibn Khaldun that he drew his inspirations for his major insights into the nature of Iraqi society, namely the pervasive dichotomy between the city, representing urban civilized values, and the steppes, representing the prevalence of nomadic, tribal values."[15] From this solid foundation, al-Wardi could argue some important points; for example, the cultural divide and hostility that exist between Iraqi Shia and Sunnis are simply a contest over religious dogma and theology is shortsighted. He argued that a more accurate representation acknowledged the historical tendency of Iraqis to devolve into antagonistic sectarian-based camps when faced with chaotic and stressful sociopolitical conditions such as the current situation in Iraq.

Through exhaustive research, al-Wardi demonstrated that because of tribal traditions, warlord tendencies, and sectarian loyalties, Iraqis historically view politics as a means of maintaining a balance of power within the tribal-based Islamic community and less as a relationship between themselves and a central governing authority.[16] Al-Wardi captured this condition through a detailed evaluation of the social psychological framework

of his own people. From this vantage point he then presented a sound but controversial thesis. He proposed that the "process of modernization and urbanization was [only] skin deep in Iraq, and that tribal and sectarian values, born of the experience of surviving in the harsh environment of the desert, continued to hold sway for the vast majority of the country's inhabitants."[17] Such a condition presents a difficult problem to the United States, for how can we expect both a national consciousness and an inherent respect for a central governing authority to emerge in Iraq when in times of chaos and conflict, the populace identifies primarily with tribal, family, and sectarian roots? As we examine present-day Iraqi society and culture, we must understand that it is these historical and cultural elements as described by al-Wardi that govern how it functions, behaves, and operates.

Iraqi Tribal Dynamics and the Surge

Through detailed critical analysis, this study revealed three insights. One, it helped substantiate the notion that an amalgamation of four developments—of which the surge was one—ultimately caused the improved situation in Iraq. Two, it validated the notion that one factor, the governing principle of tribal dynamics acting as a top-level element, affected the behavior of the other four. Three, it helped validate the existence of a cause-and-effect relationship between the surge and ITD. Understandably, the influx of troops was not responsible for the onset of the Iraqi tribal dynamics phenomenon. It did, however, exacerbate this centuries-old cultural condition by influencing the behavior patterns of the antagonistic players. To understand how, one needs to examine some key events through a tribal dynamics lens composed of the following cultural features: history, religion and politics (as they relate to the Sunni-Shia divide), loyalty, and customs (specifically blood feuds and vengeance). Such an approach encompasses examining these events from three different angles: an Iraqi societal perspective, an Iraqi Sunni perspective, and an Iraqi Shia perspective.

Iraqi Societal Perspective. Fundamentally, Iraqi culture is an Arab-based tribal society whose population is over 98 percent Muslim, with a majority of those belonging to the Shiite sect. By invading Iraq in 2003, the United States unwittingly opened up a millennium-old Sunni-Shia Pandora's cultural box. The systemic problem being, while the Sunni are the majority in the Muslim world, they are the minority in Iraq. With the ousting of Saddam Hussein, power was taken from the Sunni Ba'athists (a repressive Iraqi societal minority/Islamic community majority), and in time was

placed in the hands of Iraqi Shiites (the oppressed Iraqi majority/Islamic community minority). Based on America's foreign-policy approach to Iraq, the prevailing conventional wisdom among Iraqi Sunnis, especially within the insurgent ranks and elsewhere in the Middle East, was that the United States had sided with the Shiites.[18] The concern and fear that resonated within the Iraqi Sunni population was that since they were now the deposed minority, the Shia would take advantage of the situation and resort to the age-old tribal custom of blood-feud vengeance to exact a measure of revenge. This heightened anxiety level among Iraqi Sunnis was a catalyst for the onset of the insurgency and the sectarian civil war that followed.

Both groups saw the advent of the surge strategy in 2007 as a means of forwarding their own culturally based political agendas and objectives. The Sunni saw the new strategy as an opportunity to not only stop the bleeding but also as a means for regaining their lost hold on power and to protect them from a Shiite-dominated central government.[19] For the Shia, the surge meant they would become the undisputed winners in the sectarian civil war. Also, the influx of additional combat forces would provide them with the means for consolidating their hold on power and redressing old grievances.[20] Because each side was maneuvering to advance its own agenda, this brought into question their loyalty to what the United States was trying to achieve both strategically and politically in Iraq.[21] Examining the 2003 invasion and the 2007 surge through a tribal dynamics prism, the fundamental problem in each case was the United States did not understand from a cultural perspective the nature of the war. Ultimately, we did not understand with whom and with what we were engaged. Using the same lens to view Afghanistan, one could argue we are on the verge of making the same or similar errors there.

Iraqi Sunni Perspective. During 2005–06, a new development started to emerge in the western Anbar region of Iraq. Various Sunni tribal groups, warlords, insurgents, and militants decided to turn against their former ally, al-Qaeda in Iraq, in response to AQI's power grabs, executions, and encroachment into the illicit economic activities of the western tribes.[22] In support of this emerging movement, the western Sunni tribal sheiks formed the Anbar Salvation Council. Since the revolt of the Sunni tribal leaders against AQI predates the 2007 influx of additional combat troops, the surge was not causally connected to these events. Nevertheless, perceptive US military commanders were able to exploit the rift that had grown between the western Sunni tribes and AQI as a vehicle for quelling the

insurgency. This activity eventually transformed into the "Sunni Awakening" initiative, a US–developed plan designed to persuade various Sunni tribes and former insurgents to become part of a collaborative alliance against AQI.

The initiative was orchestrated around 80,000–100,000 individuals, 80 percent of them Iraqi Sunnis. In the end, the membership included an assortment of Sunni tribal members, former insurgents, former Saddam party loyalists, and various Sunni criminal elements. To ensure some level of success, the US military had to establish partnerships with a number of unsavory characters with questionable loyalties.[23] One of the principal reasons this US–led effort gave the appearance of success was because, from a tribal dynamics standpoint, the various western Sunni tribal entities recognized that the US military was the most powerful tribe in the country.[24] Consequently, they clearly understood that the best chance to achieve their political objectives was to dissolve the AQI partnership and form a new one with the Americans.

As the initiative took hold, it spread across many neighborhoods in the greater Baghdad area and surrounding provinces. This led to the emergence of the Concerned Local Citizens (CLC) irregular forces group. In exchange for their loyalty, the United States provided most of the CLC members with contracts worth $300 along with a pledge of incorporation into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). While the plan seemed feasible at a top level, the program, as designed, was fraught with incredible risk overall due to two important factors. First, the Sunni-based tribes and insurgent groups did not decide to cooperate with the US military simply because they had a change of heart concerning our presence and were now supportive of our plans, goals, and objectives. Second, their motivations and loyalties were not benign in nature and were more representative of their efforts to "eliminate the proximate threat from AQI, reverse their current political marginalization, and to position themselves vis-à-vis the Shia (and their presumed Iranian patrons) in the event of a U.S. withdrawal."[25]

Seeing what the United States was trying to accomplish in the homogeneous Anbar province, the al-Maliki government was initially accepting of the awakening initiative but only in principle. A key component of this US–led effort included plans for turning the program over to the Iraqi central government. But as the CLC and the Sons of Iraq movements grew and spread into mixed regions and neighborhoods, the anxiety level

of the Shia-dominated central government also increased, because from a tribal dynamics perspective, it seemed the United States was arming a potential rival that would one day challenge the authority of the central government.[26] After a bit of diplomatic arm twisting, the al-Maliki government agreed to be more accommodating. It pledged to integrate about 20 percent of the current CLC membership into the ISF, with the remainder going to nonsecurity government jobs. To date, the government has been very slow in making good on this pledge. This lack of action has forced the United States to establish a civilian job corps as a means of incorporating disenfranchised Sunnis that the government will never integrate into the ISF. If the al-Maliki government fails to carry out its promises and balks at taking over the management and funding of the civil employment program, then disillusionment and resentment over the whole process will set in, and as one US Army officer observed, "It's game on—they're back to attacking again."[27]

In retrospect, it is not clear whether the initial Sunni motivations were more defensive or offensive in nature. If their aims were defensive, they may have only been seeking security against Shia militia units and death squads and AQI foreign fighters. If the aims were more offensive and expansionist, then the CLC and the Sons of Iraq may have been seeking to "exact revenge, reclaim Sunni neighborhoods lost in 2006–07, and topple the Iraqi government."[28] Only time will tell which motivation will emerge as the most viable one.

Iraqi Shiite Viewpoint. One area where the surge may have had a direct causal effect concerns the decision by Muqtada al-Sadr to stand down the Jasih al-Mahdi (JAM) militia group. Not long after the announcement of the surge strategy, Sadr instructed his militia forces not to challenge the US–proposed Baghdad security plan. But not all agreed with Sadr's approach. On 28 August 2007, a ferocious firefight erupted in Karbala between Sadr's militia, the JAM, and members of the Badr organization, a rival group associated with the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), causing hundreds of Shia civilian casualties. The next day, Sadr announced he was standing down his militia and was ordering a six-month freeze on all armed actions in an attempt to "rehabilitate" the Mahdi army.

Some contend that the motivations behind Sadr's actions still remain unclear, but when examined through a tribal dynamics prism, they do seem sound.[29] Like their Sunni rivals, the Shia groups also recognized that the US military was the most powerful tribe in Iraq and would lose

if they tried a more-direct, confrontational approach. Another factor concerned accusations by the Iraqi Shia populace and others against the JAM for engaging in criminal activities. The stand-down could have been an attempt by Sadr to improve the group's image. A third factor could be that facing competition from extremist factions both inside and outside his organization, Sadr used a surged-up American military presence as a means of consolidating his hold on power. He accomplished this by simply looking the other way as the US military began targeting the rogue "special groups" and "secret cells" that he could no longer control.[30] From a practical tribal standpoint, it is also possible that Sadr wanted to avoid another large-scale confrontation with the US military like occurred in the summer of 2004. Finally, Sadr's behavior was probably connected to the politically savvy, Iranian-born Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who, acting in the role of a tribal sheik, most likely provided advice and guidance to Sadr on how best to proceed. Nevertheless, viewing the Sadr freeze through the ITD features of power politics, customs, and religion, the explanations of these actions seems logical. By taking a nonconfrontational approach to an enhanced American military presence, Sadr has been able to consolidate his power by letting a former enemy take care of his current enemies, along with any potential challengers.

The Surge's Limited Tactical Success—A Tribal Dynamics Perspective

Based on what appears to be an improved security situation in Iraq, the contention is that the surge has achieved some limited tactical success. The evidence to support such a claim is the decline in the number of Iraqi civilian casualties. Even though violence is still occurring in Iraq on a monthly basis, the current security situation seems to add credence to the aforementioned premise. To be sure, however, the investigation needed to examine what has been occurring in Iraq since the end of the surge through an ITD prism to determine the current trends in both security and safety and to propose what they might indicate.

The Evidence

During the 2006–07 time period, the number of Iraqi civilians killed by violence skyrocketed to its highest level since the March 2003 invasion. Using a combination of mortuary information and figures provided by

the Iraqi Ministry of Health, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq estimated that approximately 1,800 civilians died in January 2006 as a result of the wave of violence.[31] From June to December 2006, the monthly Iraqi civilian casualty average nearly doubled to 3,300. By the beginning of 2008, US administration officials and military officers started touting that the surge had achieved some limited tactical success. Their contention was that while Iraq remained a very dangerous place, events since the end of the surge seemed to suggest there had been a significant and meaningful improvement in the security situation. Eventually, other political and military leaders, along with the media, started providing similar assessments. In each case, the evidence used to support those claims was the noted decline in civilian casualties.

The first to present such evidence, compiled from both coalition force (CF) and Iraqi ministry reports, was the team of Gen David Petraeus and Amb. Ryan Crocker, the designers of the "joint campaign plan" that married the surge of troops with better counterinsurgency tactics. On 10–11 September 2007, Crocker and Petraeus testified before Congress. During the two days of testimony, General Petraeus outlined that the overall levels of attacks against coalition forces, sectarian-based killings, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, and indirect attacks against US forces were down.[32] The argument presented by Crocker and Petraeus to Congress was that the new Iraq counterinsurgency strategy, coupled with the influx of troops, was the cause for the reduction in violence and the improved security situation.

Other government organizations have made similar claims. According to Pentagon statistics, violence in Iraq declined to levels seen just prior to the February 2006 bombing of the Samarra Golden Shrine.[33] Information provided by the CF showed that the total number of attacks in October 2007 on Iraqi civilians, Iraqi military, and police forces was down 55 percent from the June 2007 levels.[34] By the end of November 2007, commanders in Iraq were stating that attacks across the board had declined to levels they had not seen since the mid-2005 time frame. While early 2007 had been the deadliest period in Iraq for US forces, near the end of 2007 the number of casualties and combat-related deaths was down substantially. The peak three-month period was April–June 2007, with 331 killed in action. By the last quarter of 2007, the numbers had declined another 28 percent—the lowest totals of the entire conflict. In December 2009, that level reached zero, a first time ever since the start of the war.

Independent sources have also provided support to the claim of limited tactical success of the surge.[35] For example, Jeffrey McCausland in his travels around Iraq gathered information from Soldiers he met at various joint security stations, patrol bases, and combat outposts scattered about the capital. In each case the troops kept telling him the same thing—they were making a difference.[36] The tangible evidence given was the fact that attacks against US forces were becoming less frequent than when they first occupied those positions. They were also being inundated with information from the local population about the location of various militia, insurgent, and AQI elements, along with the location of IEDs and weapons caches.

McCausland stressed caution, however, about jumping too soon to a positive assessment. As he correctly pointed out, one would expect that the influx of nearly 30,000 additional combat troops into areas US forces had rarely or never ventured into would produce a positive outcome. The military planners McCausland interfaced with also expressed caution about touting success too soon. The reality was the new strategy and approach had only been in effect for a few months. In their minds, prudence demanded holding off on presenting a definitive assessment on the effectiveness of the surge until an enduring trend was seen in one direction or the other.

Examining Current Events and Trends in Iraq through a TD Lens

From the perspective of tribal dynamics, we can trace the source of much of the violence in Iraq to vicious struggles for political power. Since these disputes over power sharing have gone unresolved, some have postulated that the improved security situation equates only to a tactical pause in violence.[37] In 2007, then–Iraqi deputy prime minister Barham Salih came to a similar conclusion. He remarked that "it's more of a cease-fire than a peace."[38] Some have also suggested that stability in Iraq was only the result of the surge forcing the activities of both sides underground, thus presenting a false sense of security.[39] To determine if there is any validity to these contentions, we need to examine what has been occurring in Iraq since the end of surge operations. Such analysis could help answer some important questions that have emerged during the course of this investigation while at the same time shedding light on new issues and developments not seen during the first round of violence.

As previously noted, the lowered level of civilian casualties was the primary evidence to connect the surge to improved security in Iraq. Using that as the

baseline, the investigation turned toward reporting in Iraq, specifically civilian deaths due to attacks and bombings. The data collection effort covered a time period from January to December 2009 and entailed scanning newspapers for articles on Iraq. Once compiled, the information was organized by what had occurred, where in Iraq it had occurred, when it occurred, and who was involved. The data showed that after a steady decline in the number of Iraqi civilian deaths, with January 2009 the lowest at 275, it appeared to be back on the rise. February topped out at 343 civilian deaths, followed by 408 in March and 485 in April, the highest since the start of the surge. May was a relatively quiet month with less than 200 deaths. In June the number of Iraqi civilians killed again broke the 400 mark at 438, followed by 465 in July and 456 in August. September and November were relatively quiet with approximately 18 and 22 civilian deaths, respectively. On 26 October and 8 December, suicide car bombers attacked government buildings in Baghdad, killing hundreds and wounding hundreds more, the worst violence in over two years. All combined, the total number of Iraqis killed from these and other bombings in October and December hit the 320 mark. One important fact remains. Although the number killed is way down from 2006–07 and may have even leveled out to some degree, death and violence are still occurring on a monthly basis.

An analysis of the current state of affairs in Iraq through the TD cultural features of power politics and customs resulted in three propositions. First, the uptick of violence could be a strong indicator that this is "game on," thus adding support to the premise that the perceived stable situation had only been a temporary lull and not a peace, and that the improved security situation was the result of the surge forcing the activities of both sides underground. The second centers on the possibility that the surge activity has given a false sense of security due to a false positive reading. Therefore, from a surface-level perspective, what appears to be a more stable situation actually is not. The third is that the new wave of violence could be a signal that Sunni groups have decided to abandon the CLC awakening/Sunni reconciliation initiative because the effort has not produced any tangible results, partly the result of the Shiite-dominated central government's failure to carry through on its promises of reconciliation and integration. This could be the case because, from a tribal dynamics viewpoint, it takes 100 years and three generations to work through a blood feud–centric

cultural dispute.[40] Therefore, from a practical standpoint, reconciliation is just too hard to accomplish in a relatively short period of time.

As the current events analysis progressed, three issues emerged that were not seen during 2006–07. First, what appears to be a concerted effort on the part of the Iraqi Shia militia and associated groups not to retaliate. The most likely explanation could be that they do not want to invoke a response from a reduced but still viable US military presence. While commendable, it is probably only a question of time before the Shia groups devolve into a retaliatory mode.

A second issue concerns the extent of this new surge of violence. During the 2006–07 time period, the violence was strictly an Iraqi Sunni-Shia affair centered mainly in Baghdad and the Anbar province, so the focus of the surge strategy was within and west of the capital. It did not affect the Kurdish north or the Shiite south. With this latest round of violence, a disturbing new aspect has emerged. While the perpetrators' focus is once again on fomenting a sectarian conflict, they have extended the violence to include the Kurds, a different cultural group. This has serious implications, because if the insurgents succeed in provoking the Kurds, the situation could transform from a provincial into a nationwide conflict.[41]

Lastly, based on what has been occurring recently in the Pakistani-Afghan region, there could be a connection between what appears to be a leveling out and lowering of the violence in Iraq and the increase in violence there. The characteristics of the attacks and bombings in both Afghanistan and Pakistan seem to be mimicking what has been occurring in Iraq since the start of the insurgency. The lower levels of activity in Iraq could be an indicator al-Qaeda has shifted a portion of its effort from one region to another in support of its Taliban ally.

Tribal Dynamics—What Is Next and the Road Ahead?

Given that many other foreign-policy challenges lie ahead for the United States, gaining a deeper understanding of how the culture of a region affects plans, approaches, and military outcomes is not only essential but also a vital component of our decision and strategy formulation processes. The objective of this section is to highlight how and why cultural analysis can help achieve a successful outcome in Afghanistan and the Afghan-Pakistan region by engaging in a compare-and-contrast exercise between what we now know about Iraq and the shifting of emphasis toward the Afghanistan war. Using the TD cultural features of history, loyalty, cus-

toms, religion, and power politics as a central viewing piece, the study examines three issues that form the basis of this compare-and-contrast effort. First is the call for increasing the troop presence in Afghanistan. The second concerns the plan to apply the Iraq Sunni awakening approach to lower elements of the Afghan Taliban. The third, and perhaps most critical, is the initiative to build up the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) and National Police (ANP).

Increased Troop Presence in Afghanistan. At the end of August 2009, GEN Stanley McChrystal, US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, presented to Congress his assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, followed shortly by a request for approximately 40,000 additional forces. On 2 December 2009, the Obama administration approved the approach but at a lower number than originally requested. Before getting into a discussion on an "Afghanistan surge," a reiteration of some of the key points uncovered concerning the Iraq surge is essential. One is that a combination of developments, influenced by the governing principle of tribal dynamics, was the main cause for the reduction in violence in Iraq. Another is that from a tribal dynamics perspective, the improved situation was not a true peace but only a temporary lull in the violence, because one of the unintended consequences of the Iraqi surge was that it forced the activities of both sides underground. Last, and of equal importance, is the fact that the surge succeeded tactically but failed strategically.

Regardless of the noted drawbacks and shortcomings of the surge strategy, it was still a key player in the final outcome because it changed behavior patterns. On the Iraqi Sunni side of the equation, they recognized that to advance their own "hidden hand" political objectives and agendas, they needed to partner with the strongest tribe in Iraq, the US military.[42] For the same reason, the Shia groups decided to avoid doing anything that might provoke a response from an enhanced American military presence since they were on the verge of winning the civil war. Neither group changed its behavior patterns in support of US goals or objectives concerning Iraq but did so as a means of advancing its own agenda.

In the short term, the Iraq surge may have achieved some transitory limited tactical success. In the long run, however, this success may have come at the expense of stoking "the three forces that have traditionally threatened the stability of Middle Eastern states: tribalism, warlordism, and sectarianism."[43] More importantly, history has shown that states that have failed to control these three forces have become ungovernable or

nearly ungovernable.[44] Based on what this study has uncovered concerning the surge, this could be the outcome our actions have prepared for Iraq and one that could be waiting for us in Afghanistan.

Iraq and Afghanistan are very different places, historically, culturally, and socially. The conditions and factors that are driving events in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region are very different than those affecting outcomes in Iraq. One such factor concerns the primary cultural delineations that exist between various social groups and peoples. About 99 percent of the Afghan people are Muslim, mostly members of the Sunni sect. While Afghanistan does have distinct Sunni and Shia populations, the cultural separations are less pronounced along sectarian lines and occur more along tribal, clan, and family lines. Therefore, we can characterize the Afghan war as a tribal-centric civil affair because the Taliban are Pashtuns, meaning that the conflict is fundamentally a Pashtun-related problem.

This has implications from a power politics and center of gravity perspective. According to General Petraeus, since there is no strong central government in Afghanistan for a majority of the Afghan people, the real power resides at the local level in village, tribal, and cultural traditions.[45] Thus, he contends that heavy conventional infantry units are likely to be less useful than lighter and nimbler forces, suggesting the need for moving away from a regional strategy that is military-centric and developing one that is more sociocultural-centric.[46] Therefore, depending on its composition and how it is used, it is quite possible that an influx of additional forces might result in a positive outcome. Any regional strategy should have as one of its core elements the governing principle of tribal dynamics. Because a surge of forces will have a positive and/or negative effect on the behavior patterns of all the principal players, both friend and foe, it could ultimately result in the emergence of a number of unexpected negative outcomes.

Extending this a bit further, the principal antagonistic actors/players (Afghan central government, tribes and clans, and the Taliban) could also come to view an Afghan surge as an opportunity to advance their own political agendas and objectives. For example, establishing a TD-based alliance with the United States could give one particular group the tactical, operational, and strategic edge against another in what is basically a long-standing and ongoing Afghanistan civil war. As in Iraq, such behavior would not dovetail well at all with what the United States is trying to achieve for both Afghanistan and the region. Such behavior could also call

into question a particular group's loyalty to any plans and programs the United States would try to formulate as part of its overall regional strategy. This, then, is a good segue into the next area of discussion, an examination of a possible "Taliban awakening" initiative.

The Afghan Taliban Awakening Initiative. On 15 September 2009, ADM Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Senate panel there was a plan underway to persuade lower-level Taliban elements to switch sides. The initiative is similar in design to the one used by US military commanders in Iraq and will offer incentives to Taliban fighters to do so. But before addressing the Taliban awakening effort, a reiteration of some of the key points concerning the Iraq Sunni awakening initiative is deemed essential.

The main issues surrounding the Sunni awakening effort concern the TD cultural features of loyalties, motivations, possible hidden agendas, and trust or lack thereof. As previously addressed, Iraqi Sunni groups did not engage in a cooperative venture with the US military because of a change of heart and were not supportive of US foreign policy goals and objectives.[47] On the contrary, they did so to advance their own political agendas and because the US military was handing out cash and promises of jobs in exchange for loyalty. At the present time the motivations of the Sunni groups still remain unclear, and only time will tell if they are more defensive or offensive in nature and design.[48] Finally, from a trust and good faith perspective, the al-Maliki government has failed to make good on its promises of integration and reconciliation. The inaction and/or lack of action on the part of the al-Maliki government are contributing to what appears to be a growing sense of disillusionment and frustration on the Sunni side. Because of this, the current trend analysis seems to suggest that a portion of the Sunni-based groups CLC and Sons of Iraq may have returned to the insurgency. In the end, we may find that a sizeable portion never really left.

What are the implications for Afghanistan? Looking through a tribal dynamics prism, a few cracks have already started to appear in the Taliban awakening initiative porcelain as a result of the same aforementioned factors. One in particular concerns the nature and characteristics of the present condition. As General Petraeus ably pointed out, the Taliban are not conventional fighters. They do not wear a uniform that identifies them as either Taliban or al-Qaeda or other.[49] To complicate the situation even further, the definition and characterization of "the enemy" covers a wide

spectrum. According to Petraeus, this means that "There are few true believers [in the militant Jihadist movement], but there are many others who support the enemy only because they feel threatened or intimidated and are just trying to survive."[50] The cause for concern here centers on the dynamic of interpersonal relationships governed by the TD features of kinship, clans, family, and tribal connections, which in the end could ultimately render a Taliban awakening initiative impotent.

Two cases in point support the contention that a Taliban awakening initiative could be fraught with trouble. One concerns President Karzai's lack of success in wooing back insurgent commanders. The other, which has a connection to the first, involves a Mr. Ghulam Yahya, the former mayor of Herat. Yahya is an ethnic Tajik and a former enemy of the Taliban who initially worked hand-in-hand with US, NATO, and UN officials to rebuild his country. Due to a number of interrelated issues, rampant corruption being one, Yahya has now become one of the most prominent non-Pashtun Afghan insurgent chiefs. What makes the case even more interesting is that from a TD perspective this Pashtun-Tajik connection is not a natural union, due in part to an antagonistic history. The reasons in both situations can be traced to a growing sense of frustration, disillusionment, and resentment, all linked to (1) foreign troops' lack of respect for Afghan culture, (2) foreign troops' bombing and killing of innocent people in various parts of the country, (3) ongoing foreign support for a corrupt Karzai government, (4) endemic corruption that has resulted in little to no reconstruction in certain parts of the country, and finally, (5) anger over alleged fraud in the August 2009 presidential election.[51]

Nevertheless, there seems to have been some positive developments in this area. For example, in late January 2010, an eastern Afghanistan tribe, the Shinwari group, signed a pact with US officials to keep the Taliban out of five districts of the Nangarhar province, an area that it controls composed of approximately 600,000 people. In a show of solidarity, US military officials pledged $200,000 toward a jobs program and $1 million in tribal funds. But the practical realities of tribal dynamics must temper any touting of success, due to two important interrelated factors. First, while the Karzai government most likely approved of the pact, the fact remains that the Shinwaris brokered a deal with the US military and not the Afghan central government. The second concerns the impetus for such an arrangement. According to Shinwari tribal leaders, the pact was born as much out of a growing frustration with the

Karzai government as it was a desire to keep the Taliban out. When viewing all of this through a tribal dynamics cultural lens, the building of strong relationships between the central authority, the United States and its NATO partners, the enemies of the Karzai government, and the various tribal groups is dependent on the nurturing of good faith, trust, and loyalty. Conversely, the lack thereof could have serious unintended negative consequences for both the US–led NATO coalition and the Afghan people.

Developing the Afghanistan National Army and National Police. The third and final issue centers on the buildup of the ANA and the ANP, critical key components of the coalition's new strategy to push back the insurgency. Both initiatives are fraught with incredible risk, due primarily to the influence of the TD features of history, kinship, clans, families, tribal customs, interpersonal relationships, and the delineations that these features cause amongst the various Afghan social and cultural groups.

While the problems associated with the development and buildup of both the Iraqi national police and army center on the same or similar TD cultural features, the integration issues are more sectarian in nature and characteristic compared to Afghanistan. In each case there are two similar problems associated with the development of a national army and police force. One concerns the integration of different cultural groups. A second focuses on the question of loyalty of a culturally diverse membership to a national consciousness and central governance that both institutions would come to represent. Since Afghanistan is very much a tribal- and clan-based society with little to no history of strong central governance, there are some serious doubts whether a national army or police force would endear itself to such principles. Corruption aside (which is a major problem associated with the ANP), would these organizations operate holistically across the country as an integrated unit in support of national goals and objectives? Or, due to the influence of a number of TD cultural features—such as clan loyalty, tribal customs, or distrust of central governance—would its members elect instead to fight only in those areas of the country where they are from and where their tribe, clan, and family members reside? If the answer turns out to be the latter, such a development could compromise the integrity of the strategy, causing it to eventually collapse.

Discussion and Conclusion

A key component of this investigation was to demonstrate the importance of cultural analysis in the formulation of a successful foreign-policy outcome. It achieved this via a critical evaluation of US operations in Iraq with an eye toward cause and effect. The primary objective of the investigation focused on understanding why the surge achieved its tactical military objectives but ultimately failed strategically and politically. What the data suggest is that influence of various cultural variables, specifically in the form of tribal dynamics, could be the reason the surge was successful in one domain but not in the other. To gain a more positive reading will require further testing through careful observation and evaluation of Iraqi sociopolitical and security conditions over an extended period of time. One limitation of the study was that the analysis of the Iraqi tribal entities occurred only at the macro level, while a sound and viable methodology engaging in a micro-level examination and approach would help further substantiate the argument that detailed cultural knowledge is a key component in any foreign policy and strategy development and management process. Nevertheless, at this stage, four important implications have emerged.

The work demonstrated that the surge, working in conjunction with four other developments, helped to bring about what appeared to be an improved security situation in Iraq. Data from initial analysis also suggested there was one top-level cultural factor that directly influenced the behavior of the other four—the governing principle of Iraqi tribal dynamics. Additional critical analysis was required to provide a strong case in support of that premise. Examining the connection between the principle of tribal dynamics and the surge accomplished two things: (1) it validated the notion that tribal dynamics did function as an overarching governing factor, and (2) it demonstrated that while the surge may have achieved only limited tactical success, it was a major player in a couple of key ways. First, the influx of additional combat forces was the causal factor that drove ITD–based activity in a number of unforeseen and unintended directions. Secondly, acting as a component within the tribal dynamics construct, the surge was responsible for changing the behavior patterns of the principal antagonistic players and in ways that were also unexpected. All these variables combined could help to explain why the surge was both a tactical success and a strategic failure.

To better understand and appreciate the governing principle of ITD requires becoming knowledgeable on its nature and characteristics. The study achieved this goal by examining tribal dynamics from a number of different perspectives, such as general Middle Eastern, historical, and sociological viewpoints. This activity showed how tribal dynamics arrived in Iraq and how it is still a principal factor in present-day Iraqi culture and society. It also highlighted some of the cultural features on which ITD is predicated, such as customs, history, religion, politics, and interpersonal relationships—all of which factor into this notion of dynamics.

Many foreign challenges lie ahead for the United States, not only in Iraq but elsewhere across the globe, such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. An essential part of this work examined the way forward through a cultural-tribal dynamics viewing piece. Since cultural factors do impact strategic plans and military outcomes, a portion of this effort was dedicated to showing how a cultural-based process specifically focused on one particular element—tribal dynamics—can help in current and future foreign-policy initiatives. The study achieved that goal via a compare-and-contrast analysis between operations in Iraq and the situation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Even though both places and the situations contained in each are very different, utilization of a TD cultural-based-analysis approach was the common thread that made such an analysis possible. What emerged were some top-level commonalities in the development of awakening initiatives, national armies and police forces, plans, and strategies that demonstrated the role such analysis plays in fomenting a successful outcome in these and other related efforts.

Finally, General McChrystal assessed the situation in Afghanistan as critical and headed for failure unless the United States committed more troops. Since there are so many variables in play—tribal dynamics, an ongoing civil war, and the irrational-rational behavior of our enemy, to name a few—the best one can say at this time is that this may or may not be the case. The reality is that the possible outcomes, like the variables, are also wide and varied. Nonetheless, on 2 December 2009 at West Point, President Obama announced the administration's new Afghan war strategy, which also encompassed Pakistan. The plan basically called for sending 30,000-plus additional US forces to Afghanistan by summer 2010, with a systematic withdrawal of surge-related troops starting in July 2011, depending on conditions. Understandably, the new strategy in no way ensures that we will achieve success in Afghanistan, let alone defeat the Taliban and its

al-Qaeda allies. Nevertheless, there are a few incontrovertible facts tied to the Obama administration's newly announced approach. One in particular is that success or failure in both this and future foreign-policy ventures will ultimately depend on a strategy formulation and management process that is both culturally centric and iterative in design. The reasoning is that the strategic leaders would then have at their disposal a mechanism for critically examining the validity of various strategies and plans through a culturally dynamic prism that, in the final analysis, may help to increase the chances of the United States achieving a positive outcome. **SSQ**

Notes

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